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"GALILEE TO JERUSALEM"
MARK 10:32-45
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Lent, I would submit, just isn't what it used to be. We are not in a Lenten mood today, culturally or religiously. As I move about the city I see very little that indicates that this season of the year is any different from any other season. The Roman Catholics still observe the ritual of Ash Wednesday, but from the Protestant side of it Lent has more to do with tournament time than suffering, sacrifice and self-denial.

What it used to be for me - and for a lot of people - was Midweek Services Now Presbyterians stopped going to church on Wednesday evening a long time ago. But in Lent we used to gear up, and it was simply one of the givens for us. Lenten services were held on Wednesday night, and we used to get on the bus and go, and I don't remember there being much discussion about it. We went to Church every night in Holy Week; twice on Good Friday. Year after year we heard the passion story read until the details were seared in our memories. Now please understand that my family was not extraordinarily devout. We were members of a Presbyterian Church and we attended it regularly. We were not deeply involved in the life of that church. But we did go. And what came through to me in all that sitting in the church was something very important. I don't recall one word spoken by a minister in a Lenten sermon. But through it all I recognized somehow that Easter wasn't cheap-for God - for Jesus - or for me, because I had a lot of time invested in getting ready for it.

That's been lost. And I think we are poorer for it. Some of it was rather rote, to be sure. Some of the Lenten sacrifices people used to make - like giving up sweets, or going to the movies - were pretty banal. But somehow through all the banality and superficiality the message got across that Easter is more than a new hat, a full sanctuary and the aroma of lilies. That I regret.

Part of the reason we have lost it, I suppose, is busyness. Unlike the life style of twenty or twenty five years ago, we literally do not have time. And it would take a selling job of mammoth proportions to convince Presbyterian

that it's more important to be in church on Wednesday nights than at any of the other meetings, engagements, or entertainments that are already on the docket. When put in direct competition with almost anything else in life the Church finishes dead last. We are busy. But I believe there is more to it than that.

Theologically, Christian Faith maintains that resurrection happens at the end of a process that includes commitment, sacrifice, suffering, self-denial and death. And that the resurrection really becomes something worth shouting about only after one has confronted what preceeds it. But we're just not in the mood for that religiously at this moment in time. "Celebration" is "in". Everyone is celebrating something. And while the church in our time badly needs an infusion of joy and gladness, my concern is that it is a superficial joy that does not grow out of God's victory in Jesus Christ over the forces of evil, sin and death. I discovered, while working on this sermon, why I'm becoming a little weary of the word "celebration'. An apocryphal story is told about a church that was ordering new altar cloths and pulpit scarves: red, green, white - all the liturgical colors of the church year but the violent of Lent. No violet - it's too depressing.

Partially, I suppose, It is a reflection of a prevailing mood in our culture. We've had it so good materially for so long that real existential dread is reserved not for plagues, famine and earthquakes -but for inflation. Any concept of voluntary, intentional sacrifice is totally alien. Along the way to affluence, or perhaps as a consequence of it, we have become accustomed to "instant gratification." Whatever we do, we want the reward - the prize - now, not later. "Laugh In" several years ago caught the mood of our culture in the phrase, 'If it feels good, do it." That's a bit racy for most of us, and what our life style reflects is a slight variation on the theme; that is, "If it doesn't feel good, there's no way I'm going to do it." Sometimes it seems to me that that is almost the motto of our generation. Even when we are doing things that are charitable and sacrifical we have a desparate need

to make it look like fun. Consider the United Fund - and I'm not knocking it. But knowing about human need in our community is not enough. It's not enough to tell the story and ask people to help. It has to sound like fun - and become stylish and fashionable. It has to feel good.

Lent just isn't what it used to be. All of that by way of approaching the New Testament Lesson this morning. Notice, again, the sequence in the tenth chapter of Mark: on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus out in front, the disciples following behind,amazed and afraid. He chose the occasion to announce, for the third time, what was ahead. The prior two times the disciples had not understood - or had been unwilling to understand. He told it graphically using four harsh verbs: mock, spit, scourge, kill. And at that point James and John showed how totally detached they were from what he was saying by choosing the occasion to ask for a favor.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." The timing wasn't very good. But Jesus, ever patient, responded: "You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to stand with me in the days ahead?" A little too brightly they answered "We are able". They weren't, of course. When the chips were down they, with all the rest, backed out. But later, tradition has it, both died as martyrs. In any case, Jesus seized the occasion to teach a lesson - a lesson about greatness as servanthood. He concluded with the words: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom to many."

There are a lot of important, suggestive themes in that passage. But in the context of Lent, and our earlier discussion, the one thing that stands out is a rather clear dividing line in Jesus' life between Galilee and Jerusalem. It was a turning point for him, not only in terms of time and geography, but also in terms of a different style of faithfulness. Galilee represents one style - Jerusalem, another style. James and John clearly indicate that they prefer it in Galilee and want to avoid the meaning of moving to Jerusalem.

For Jesus the decision to leave Galilee and go to Jerusalem meant going from the place of comparitive safety to the place of danger. David H. C. Read writes: "This is the turning point in the Gospel story. The Galilee days are over. There will be no more happy crowds gathered on the beach while Jesus speaks from the side of a little boat: no more fishing expeditions: no more quiet evenings in the villages around Capernum: no more nights of deep communion under the Galilean stars; no more swelling crowds hanging on his words and jostling to touch the hem of his garment. Galilee lies behind." (Notable Sermons from Protestant Pulpits P.173)

Jerusalem stands for threat, danger, big city cynicism, power, strangers, lonliness and the ever present shadow of Rome.

The two places represent two kinds of religion.

Think about it. Galilee religion has to do with peace, comfort, love, joy, meditation,prayer: religion untainted by conflict and controversy: religion that is untouched by and unresponsive to the kinds of things that happen in the city. It is a popular kind of religion, the kind that sells well and is conspicuously successful. It is what many of us want from our religion: an escape, or at least a respite from the harsh realities of life that occupy us six days a week.

In terms of ethics, it's the kind of religion that knocks off the rough abrasive edges of Jesus' teaching and makes his brand of morality sound suspiciously like the Boy Scout law. In terms of the Bible it is the kind of religion that is very selective. One observer notes that when it comes to reading the Bible, we have developed a system "whereby I put in my thumb and pull out a plum and say 'what a good boy am I'; whereas we know perfectly well that some of the Bible plums taste very bitter and sour in our mouths and leave us feeling anything but good."

In terms of the life of Christ itself, this kind of religion has it all on the quiet shores of the lake, or in the garden praying, never in the dirt and sweat of the city market place.

Jesus spent time in Galilee, doing Galilee things. Honest religion includes comfort peace, joy, meditation. But the time came when he moved from one place to the other. He needed, in order to be honest with himself, to go to the place where life is lived harshly and meanly. He had to expose himself, his teaching, his Gospel to the raw skepticism of the market place and court and city street. He could not have it all in Galilee

James and John speak for a lot of us when they ride rough shod over his warning about what it means to go to Jerusalem . And when the going got tough; when friendly crowds became a threatening mob of strangers, they deserted him.

We do too, don't we? The favorite middle class remedy to a lot of societal problems seems to be moving. When the schools get in trouble, when racial trouble begins to brew, when politics get corrupt and taxes too high, Americans move away - just like that. William Muehl, Chaplain at Yale University has changed a phrase in a favorite old Gospel song so that it comes out:

"Is there trouble and temptation?
Is there sorrow anywhere?
We need never be discouraged
N o one's making us stay there."

But more to the point, there is no quicker way to cause a churchman to leave, than for his church to do or say something that sounds as if it might be moving from Galilee to Jerusalem. The United Presbyterian Church fell from grace,lost millions of dollars and thousands of members when it decided that the time had come to move from Galilee to Jerusalem: to be honest about following a Lord who made that same move. We don't even want to be inconvenienced by our church. People tell me that they can't come on Sunday morning because it's the only morning they have to sleep in - as if that somehow settles the matter. And when the church gets involved in controversy: when friends start asking "What in the world are Presbyterians up to?": when we begin to feel the slightest bit of discomfort - we either find another church that stays in Galilee-and there are plenty of them-or we stay home.

The deeper significance to all of this is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to you and me to a new life. It is not merely an invitation to join a church and make a pledge, although that is part of it. At heart it is an invitation to change, to become something altogether different from what we were before. Saint Paul saw it in terms of the old man dying with Christ and a new man rising - to a new life, a whole new world, a new way of living and thinking. And it is apparent that if we haven't been down that road we will continue to drag our feet when Jesus Christ turns his attention to Jerusalem.

No one understood that more clearly than the late Dietrick Bonhoeffer. In fact, Bonhoeffer was so terribly honest about the Gospel that I find it uncomfortable to read him any more. Ten years ago I was very enthusiastic about him and his writing and his impact. Ten years later, and older, and more settled in, they threaten me a little bit. Bonhoeffer, of course, didn't just say it. He lived out his theology and was executed by the Nazis. Listen to his words:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time - death in Jesus Christ." (The Cost of Discipleship, P. 79)

Something must die when we decide to follow Jesus Christ. He understood that - laid it out plainly at every opportunity - never forced, coerced or even persuaded anyone to follow him. Commitment to him meant that something deep inside had to be turned around. Call it sin, or self, or egotism. Whatever you want to call it, it means that old attitudes, old priorities are set aside and new attitudes, new priorities take their place. I don't care how many dramatic conversion experiences a person had had, that is what conversion means. Something has to go. And a new being has to be reflected in a new way of looking at things that is shaped and molded and informed by Jesus

Christ.

There is a prayer written by a Chinese Christian that goes: "O God, ever give us something to die for, for if we have nothing to die for, we have nothing for which to live."

That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is to have something to die for - and therefore something for which to live. It means that in and through all the commitments we make, one stands above all the rest. It means that our relationships with others, our opinions in the political arena, our plans and goals are an outgrowth of the new life based on Jesus Christ.

The disciples were amazed and afraid. And for good reason. Again David Read has drawn a verbal picture that speaks eloquently.

"Can you see them moving up that rocky path to Jerusalem on that spring morning? Jesus is not with them. With face set in determination he strides on up the rocky path to meet his most deadly foes. Perhaps already on the horizon he can see a cross where some wretched rebel hangs a victim to Roman power. And some distance behind come the disciples, in twos and threes, exchanging frightened glances, stumbling forward, tired, troubled, amazed and afraid. (Ibid, P.175)

If Lent means anything at all to us it is this. There is no cheap road to glory - as James and John discovered. There is no convenient way to be a Christian. There is no resurrection without a cross. There is no joy on Easter Morning unless it is preceeded by suffering and death.

So, let us follow, stumbling behind, amazed and afraid - but following.

AMEN

FATHER, keep us from all that is superficial about the days ahead. Help us each to follow, wherever our Lord leads us. AMEN